

Story 2104 (1999 Tape 1

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Location: Akkent town, Çal  
kaza, Denizli  
Province

Date: May 11, 1999

An Episode Involving a Rain Stone

My mother told me this story about an experience she witnessed in her childhood. It is a kind of story one can hear throughout Turkey, not just in her (and my) hometown and the surrounding area in Denizli Province. It concerns drought and how farmers attempt to cope with it. There are a great many beliefs about dry weather.

My mother's family once suffered through a very dry season. That was followed by unusual summer heat during the next season. This was disastrous for the kind of farming carried on by a majority of the 5,000 inhabitants of Akkent. The principal crop there was grapes, and the owners of vineyards made their livings by selling both fresh and dried grapes. Many of their farms lay along the banks of the Greater Menderes River and in the uplands rising from the river, and those particular farms were more fortunate than those lying farther from water sources.

In more highly developed countries there are technological means of reducing the effect of drought. But in

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places like Turkey various religious practices are used to bring rain to the parched land. Some people gather in groups to pray for rain. Some offer greater charity, especially in the feeding of children. Others may take vows to offer future sacrifices to the Deity.<sup>1</sup> But the ancient rainmaking efforts still employed in our area during my mother's childhood were more dramatic and colorful. They were based on a belief in the effectiveness of what were called "rain stones." When the land was dry to plant wheat or to cultivate the vineyards, farmers preferred to rely on the effectiveness of those special stones. The town of Akkent had such a stone, which was kept hidden, during normal times, in the tomb of Grandfather Ahmet.<sup>2</sup> But when drought struck the area, the stone was taken from that tomb and carried to the Greater Mendere River two kilometers to the north. There it was tied securely with ropes in the shallow water of the river a short period of time. Soon it would begin to rain. After enough rain had fallen, the stone was retrieved from the

<sup>1</sup>This commitment to make sacrifices in gratitude for Divine help is commonly called an adak.

<sup>2</sup>Who was Grandfather Ahmet? One can surmise that he might have been a holy man: a saint, a dervish, or possibly a Sufi. In this context the grandfather (dede in Turkish) need not indicate advanced age. It was often used as a term of respect for a devout wise man.

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river and once again stored safely in the tomb of Grandfather Ahmet.

As I mentioned earlier, during my mother's childhood there was a period of two dry and hot seasons when farming was almost impossible. The farmers decided that this was the kind of emergency that could be overcome only with the help of the rain stone. They prayed at mosque and at the tomb of Grandfather Ahmet. Then they took the rock and prepared to suspend it in the Menderes River. My mother's father (my grandfather) was then mayor of the town. He selected three men to take the rain stone and tie it in the river. He also ordered them to tie the other end of the rope to a tree on the bank so that the stone would not be lost. While this discussion was going on, the rest of the people held a celebration in the center of the town. They first prayed at the mosque, and then they ate food that had been prepared just for that occasion. It was almost as joyous as wedding festivities. Everyone was included, even the children.

The entire group of people walked with the men carrying the rain stone to the river. They were all excited about the possibility of having some rainfall. Hocas<sup>3</sup> prayed as the

<sup>3</sup>A hoca is a preacher and the religious leader of a Muslim community. In pre-Republican times, a hoca was also a teacher,

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men appointed by the mayor lowered the rain stone into the water and tied it in place. With no warning at all, rain began to fall. It rained and rained so hard and so steadily that the area began flooding. Rain which had fallen on slopes of the nearby Çökelez Mountain also descended onto the plain below, and there was no way to control this dangerous situation. The men holding the ropes that secured the rain stone lost their footing before they could tie the ends of their ropes to trees, and because of that, the precious object was carried away by the river. They searched frantically to recover that rain stone and drag it ashore, but it was lost in the swollen river and was never seen again.

Everyone was alarmed by the loss of that stone, and many feared that the rain would never stop. They had good reason to fear that, for it did continue to rain hard for several days. People began to compare this deluge with the flood of Noah's time.

It was not just our town that experienced this flood but also many other towns and villages in our region. The for then education was the responsibility of the clergy. Now teachers have secular rather than religious training, but for sentimental reasons a teacher or professor is still referred to as hoca.

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water in the Menderes River rose so high that all of the fields along its banks were inundated. Most of the uplands above the river fared better.

After the water had subsided somewhat, men along the Menderes River again searched for the rain stone, but it was never recovered. Out of all this turmoil came one lasting benefit: the area has never suffered another serious drought since that time.